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Reflections on the Founding of MAC in 1972

By Patrick M. Quinn

In the spring of 1972, when about one hundred archivists from Midwestern states convened in Chicago to found the Midwest Archives Conference, I don't think that any of us imagined that we were participating in a historic event that would be celebrated in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 40 years later. For quite a few of us from the archival staffs of the Wisconsin Historical Society and the University of Wisconsin Archives in Madison, the spring meeting in Chicago provided an opportunity to shop at Marshall Field's, drink good beer at the Berghoff Restaurant, go to the Art Institute of Chicago, and otherwise enjoy the rites of spring in one of the nation's great cities.

Nobody really knows whose idea it was to establish a professional archival organization in the Midwest. A similar effort was underway on the East Coast that resulted in the founding of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. Perhaps the idea to form MAC had germinated in the minds of Jerry Ham of the Wisconsin Historical Society and Phil Mason of Wayne State University, who, with Mary Lynn McCree of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Bob Warner of the University of Michigan, were then among the "Young Turks" emerging into leadership positions in the SAA and saw the formation of a regional archival organization as a potential base.

Many of the younger archivists who founded MAC, including me, Archie Motley, Nick Burckel, Frank Cook, and Steve Masar, had been members of ACT, the progressive caucus in the SAA. We thought that forming a regional archival organization could help to democratize the SAA, provide a forum for "rank and file" archivists, and serve as a counterweight to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and southern archivists who had dominated the SAA for many years. Moreover, we thought that a regional archival organization that met twice a year (in the spring in Chicago, and in the fall at a different city in the Midwest each year) could help break down our isolation. The only time prior to the founding of MAC that we had an opportunity to meet and talk with other archivists was once a year at the annual meeting of the SAA, and many "rank and file" archivists could not attend the annual SAA meetings.

Support to found MAC primarily came from archivists in the states of Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. Archivists in these states did not have a state archival organization

as did archivists in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. In fact, many members of the state organizations in those states were initially wary of MAC, seeing

it as a rival to their organizations. It took several years of MAC's collaboration with the state organizations to break down their initial animosity. The MAC region was originally confined to the states of Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa. Only later were the states of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and, eventually, Kentucky, incorporated into the MAC region.

Phil Mason wrote the MAC constitution, but with the founding of MAC, younger, more "rank and file" archivists assumed leadership roles. Archie Motley of the Chicago Historical Society was elected MAC's first president. MAC would serve as an organizational training ground for many archivists who would later become presidents of the SAA. Longstanding traditions were quickly established, including the famous MAC mixer, which served to socialize members, assisted by ice-filled bathtubs loaded with many cans of beer. Several senior archivists in the MAC region, including Maynard Brichford and Ken Duckett—initially skeptical about MAC—soon became convinced of its viability and became enthusiastic members. Maynard, highly respected and admired by younger archivists who considered him to be an "archivist's archivist," became one of MAC's foremost proponents.

Over the past four decades, MAC has evolved into a distinguished, extremely useful organization of professional archivists, greatly exceeding the vision of those of us responsible for its founding. Some of the early traditions are gone, including the ice-and-beer-filled bathtub mixers, and the holding of two general meetings a year (which, in my judgment, should be restored), but our current and future members will establish new traditions. For my part, I am very proud to have been a founding member of MAC and to have never missed attending a MAC meeting during my career. I look forward to MAC celebrating its 50th anniversary a decade from now.

